



## The Enduring Legacy of Punishment

A Review of

*Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children: Cross-National Comparative Studies*

by Joseph Murray, Catrien C. J. H. Bijleveld, David P. Farrington, and Rolf Loeber

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Growing up in the United States is a risky business for large numbers of children—particularly children of the poor and children of color, who disproportionately become involved in the child welfare system. Many children face extreme violence within families and communities; for example, in 2009, nearly 2,500 of the nation’s children were killed by family members (Every Child Matters, 2010). Perhaps less well recognized is the extent to which violence against children and others in the United States is embedded in a social and cultural context in which punishment and retribution are viewed as justifiable responses to undesired behavior. As recently as 2013, 60 percent of Americans expressed support for the death penalty (Jones, 2013). There is also evidence that 60 percent of television programs depict violence (Wilson et al., 2002), and punishment and retribution are common themes in these programs.

Violent crime in the United States occurs at a rate well above the rates in other developed nations (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013). An analysis of data compiled by the United Nations in 2012 shows that the U.S. gun murder rate is nearly 20 times the average rate of 31 other developed countries (Fisher, 2012). Moreover, rates of child mortality due to maltreatment in the United States are among the highest in the industrial world (UNICEF, 2013), and homicide is the second leading cause of death among the nation’s children ages 15–19 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Consistent with the cultural emphasis on punishment and retribution, the United States, as of 2013, had the highest rate of imprisonment of any country in the world; indeed, nearly half of the world’s 10.2 million prisoners are in the United States (Walmsley, 2013), as are nearly a third of imprisoned women and girls (Walmsley, 2006).

These high and punitive rates of imprisonment may be yet another threat to the well-being of children. In their concise and compelling book *Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children: Cross-National Comparative Studies*, Murray, Bijleveld, Farrington, and Loeber provide support for the detrimental effects of punishment-oriented criminal justice on

children of offenders. Their evidence on the impact of parental incarceration is derived from four large-sample longitudinal studies from four different countries (the United States, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) as well as from a systematic review of the available published and unpublished research. The findings reveal that incarceration, meant to stop offenders, might actually contribute to crime rates as well as antisocial behavior in the next generation as part of a system of cyclical violence in which a punishment-oriented society maintains or heightens the problem through its retributive efforts to suppress violence and other unwanted behavior.

More specifically, the analyses by Murray and associates provide considerable support for a link between parental incarceration and children's adverse outcomes, for example, involvement in crime—although there were some differences in particular types of adverse outcome across countries. In particular, the analyses indicate that parental incarceration has more negative effects on children within countries with more penal-focused systems (the United States and United Kingdom) than in countries with more rehabilitative-focused systems (the Netherlands and Sweden). Furthermore, in the Netherlands, where criminal justice laws have become increasingly penal and less family friendly over time, findings indicate that children with incarcerated parents in later, more punishment-oriented generations had worse outcomes than those in earlier generations.

Murray and his coauthors briefly discuss several theoretical frameworks that they view as shedding light on how parental incarceration may affect child development adversely—attachment theory, strain theory, social learning theory, stigma and labeling theories, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. In our view, another highly relevant theoretical construct is *structural violence*—"the unequal distribution of power and wealth within and between societies [that] has insidious effects on the health, intellectual development, education, and general welfare of millions of children" (Schwabel & Christie, 2001, p. 1).

The unequal distribution of power and wealth in the United States, which is characterized by a gap between the rich and poor that is larger than what is found in 17 other industrialized countries, may contribute to both the country's disproportionately high incarceration rate and the negative outcomes associated with incarceration. The fact that of the four countries studied, the United States has the highest income inequality rate (as indexed in a Gini score) and Sweden has the lowest does not seem irrelevant to us (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014).

In light of the rise in incarceration rates in the United States and several other countries, and given the evidence that current punishment-oriented systems have negative effects on children, Murray et al. call for a reexamination of current punitive systems. Even if incarceration sentences are not reduced, they suggest that policies may be put into place to ease transportation, communication, and economic hardship problems within families with an incarcerated family member that may mitigate the negative impact of incarceration on families and children. The authors also recommend further research on experimental alternative interventions for individuals convicted of crimes. Current policies, particularly in the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, do not seem to be serving either this high-risk population or their children well.

The book is rich in methodological and technical detail. Each of the chapters describes the relevant data set, the variables that were analyzed and controlled for, the kinds of analyses

that were done, and the findings of the various, often competing, tests of hypotheses. The meta-analysis chapter provides a detailed description of the systematic selection of studies included in the review, criteria by which studies were selected, variables controlled for, and analyses conducted. It is a fine example of the kinds of hypothesis testing that can be done with rich available data sets and is particularly valuable because of the authors' ability to identify and work with data sets with important common variables from different countries. The book would not be an easy read for undergraduates despite the importance and timeliness of the topic, but it is an important contribution to the research literatures on the criminal justice system and risk factors to child development.

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